

ARTICLE

Balancing scripted and unscripted dialogue: the significance of intuition and presence in restorative justice pedagogy

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Abstract

In restorative justice approaches to education, educators and community-based workers – such as teachers, administrators, social workers, and child and youth workers – often follow detailed scripts when conflict erupts. When used without conscious connection and reflection in post-incident reactive responses, such scripts can circumvent the actual issue and perpetuate harm. Centring humanity and relational connection in any restorative process requires intuitive and critical thinking if educators are to select questions with intention – they need to know when and how to modify approaches to facilitate equity and inclusion. Scripts are necessary for educators who need guidance and support when responding to conflict with a restorative process. Nevertheless, script use must be balanced with an intuitive, reflexive praxis that calls them to pause in the present moment and respond with intention. This article describes how three teachers used various scripted and unscripted approaches to resolve conflict and promote peace.

Keywords: intuitive pedagogy, inclusion, mindfulness, restorative justice in education.

1 Restorative justice as an intuitive, reflexive praxis

Certain professions are expected to know how to handle conflict when it arises. Many educators (such as teachers and administrators) and community-service personnel (such as child and youth workers, law enforcement personnel and social workers) are expected to respond appropriately when conflict erupts (Barsky, 2016; Parker, 2015). Traditional, largely punitive, post-incident responses in schools – particularly involving Black, Brown and Indigenous children and others with marginalised identities – produce a largely negative impact. As a result, many

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schools have turned to restorative justice in education for more proactive approaches to deter as well as respond to conflict.

Indeed, restorative justice is now widely accepted as an approach to managing conflicts more effectively and more inclusively (Zehr & Mika, 2017, pp. 73-81). Restorative justice in education establishes a robust learning community where justice is the focal point and where relationships flourish (Evans & Vaandering, 2022; Reimer, 2020). Authentic pedagogical implementation of restorative justice in the classroom embodies an intuitive, reflexive praxis, which centres humanity and relational connection, and in which educators are critically conscious and aware in the present moment. In this approach, scripts are popularly used to structure the process.

Scripts are like a recipe: a beginner needs to follow every step, while an expert adapts and modifies the recipe as needed. Experienced restorative justice practitioners embrace their intuition when implementing restorative justice processes. In the beginning, practitioners and teachers may rely on scripts to ground themselves, but as their practice deepens, they may find scripts less useful. They have learned to rely on their capacity to model vulnerability, an essential intuitive skill.

A social worker recently shared a challenging situation. A female Grade 8 student of Indo-Caribbean descent was frequently called to the principal's office. From there, she was often diverted to the social worker's office right next door where, every time, she shut down. The social worker, who identified as a Black Jamaican woman, chose to ask the student to walk with her down to the gymnasium on the other side of the school building. She knew of the student's athletic interest and her appreciation for physical activity. She sat with her, face to face –embracing vulnerability by choosing not to sit in an office behind a desk. Over time, the social worker's colleagues observed the progress that she was making with this student and expressed surprise at the quick progression of the student's vulnerability. The social worker shared how she began connecting by making intuitive choices, from the words she chose to the environment in which she chose to meet. While still maintaining boundaries and high expectations for engagement, the relational connection subsequently deepened. The social worker was actively aware, present and in tune with the needs of this young person.

Facilitating such relational connections is critical when working with students who have suffered trauma (Desautels, 2018; Perry, Pollard, Blakley, Baker & Vigilante, 1995). Having created a safe space, a facilitator can be in the present moment – able to understand and immediately address negative emotions as they arise (Hawkins, 2021, pp. 203-242).

Intuitive responses, such as those exemplified by this social worker, underscore a collective, intersectional understanding of interpersonal engagement, emphasizing the interconnectedness of individuals. Through the lens of critical feminism, the development of relationships deliberately confronts and seeks to mitigate the effects of power imbalances, identity constructs and social stratifications (Ahmed, 2004; hooks, 2000).

Conversely, patriarchal and structural frameworks often obstruct or challenge intuitive reactions, imposing restrictions on how individuals should react –

verbally, physically or ethically – to conflict and harm, influenced by gendered expectations (Weikel, 1995). The presumption that students' interactions should conform to normative standards based on race, gender or other facets of their (marginalised) identities perpetuates identity-based harm, further entrenching societal divisions (González, 2015; Wadhwa, 2015; Winn, 2020).

Feminist and intuitive ways of knowing are useful guides in approaches to restorative justice, offering ways that give insights into people's emotions (Daly & Stubbs, 2013). Considering how feelings are produced, regulated and experienced allows for emotions to flourish: 'Emotions are relational: they involve (re)actions or relations of "towardness" or "awayness" in relation to such objects' (Ahmed, 2004: 8). People detached from their emotions (and thus not present) may not actually know how they feel or be in a position to verbally articulate and justify their emotions. Still, decisions and intuitions are profoundly shaped by people's identities, social positions, and perceptions of power within their environments. These factors influence not only individual choices but also the dynamics within groups, affecting whose voices are prioritised and what the outcomes of collective decision-making may be. In this way, one's identity and capacity for critical thinking and intuition converge with scripted and unscripted opportunities.

Educators often rely on a scripted approach – one with predefined questions – to better support the application of restorative justice in schools (Burford, Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2019). This can include structured questions aimed at all parties involved in the conflict. For the person who presumably caused harm, typical scripted restorative questions are: 'What happened?', and 'What were you thinking at the time?', 'What have you thought about since?', 'Who has been affected, and what do you need to do to make things right?'. The person who has been harmed might be asked questions such as: 'What did you think when you realized what happened?', 'How have you been impacted?', and 'What do you think needs to happen to make things right?' (Costello, Wachtel & Wachtel, 2019). Other approaches to scripts rely more on the structure of the circle process and are designed to be adaptable to the specific needs and contexts of the group or issue being addressed. This may involve planning for an opening and closing ceremony, creating guidelines, community-building questions and circle rounds, to focus on the impact and needs of those involved, allowing for a process of agreement to surface (Pranis, 2005).

In many ways, scripts are a way to avoid harm; without them, educators sometimes fear unconsciously reinscribing punitive responses – reenacting harmful behaviours they observed as a child themselves, or learned during a teacher training programme that did not teach through a restorative justice lens (Lopez & Olan, 2021; Sleeter, 2017). The 'invisible powerful hands' (Burford, Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2019: 2) behind such scripts often serve to intercept and control how conflicts are managed, making both restorative justice and responsive regulation more challenging (Tyler, 2006). Activating a critically intuitive approach can make sure that scripts act as supportive tools without impeding the genuine, human-centred connections essential for authentic restorative justice. Furthermore, 'justice' in restorative practices underscores every individual's inherent value (Evans & Vaandering, 2022). This principle, which calls

for protecting everyone's rights, is central to all forms of restorative justice in education. Thus, when I use 'restorative teaching' or 'restorative practice,' the notion of justice is implicitly embedded, reflecting its fundamental role in these approaches.

In any restorative practice, the dance of relationship is prioritised. Relationships cannot be scripted. For instance, when hearing oppressive language targeted towards women, a facilitator may need time to reflect before making a move instead of immediately using a script. Scripts can quieten dialogue; when responses diverge from what is expected in a script, continuing to follow the script may leave important issues and questions unaddressed in favour of reaching a predetermined end. Some teachers rely on scripts to do just that: to maintain and quieten conflicts as they arise. In such cases, scripts constrain the embodiment of vulnerability necessary for restorative justice.

Despite its popularity, the scripted approach has received much criticism for being ineffective or even harmful, particularly when practitioners adhere too rigidly to a predefined set of questions. This may detract from cultivating meaningful relationships (Evans & Vaandering, 2022; Parker-Shandal & Bickmore, 2020; Reimer, 2020; Reimer & Parker-Shandal, 2023). People engaged in resolving conflict need to have the capacity to think critically and relationally. Without the time and patience for this, they too often get stuck in how conflict is playing out in the moment. Usually, they address the specific incident. However, that incident is only the tip of the conflict's iceberg; its causes and the means to their resolution are hidden below the surface. Dialogue is needed to uncover them (Banmen, 2002; Umbreit, Blevins & Lewis, 2015). Conscious awareness and connection are critical for this process.

Jumping too quickly towards a resolution by relying on a script can have negative consequences. Users may move into resolution before exploring relational depths. Focusing on the incident, the part that is above the surface, ignores the bulk of the conflict below the surface. It also provides no time for practitioners to reflect on how conscious or unconscious biases may be influencing their own actions. Relying on scripts in these moments is especially detrimental to students who are in marginalised positions; they are harmed by the bias and by the script, which is doing a disservice to the conflict (Wadhwa, 2020; Winn, 2020).

However, scripts can also be used to provide guidance and preparation for facilitators to approach difficult issues. For instance, when preparing for community-building circles, having a set of carefully crafted questions can significantly enhance the effectiveness of conflict dialogue (Parker-Shandal, 2022). This approach not only supports the overarching objectives of these discussions but also boosts the facilitators' confidence by providing a clear framework for the subsequent questions. Such preparation is particularly valuable when tackling contentious issues. For instance, addressing sensitive topics such as racism and discrimination can be daunting for educators, who fear they may inadvertently overlook crucial aspects of these complex subjects. By thoughtfully scripting the questions and their own anticipated responses in advance, teachers can better navigate the nuanced dynamics of emergent dialogue. This preparatory step ensures that the conversation not only acknowledges the immediate incidents but

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also progresses towards constructive solutions, focusing on actionable steps that respect and incorporate the needs and emotions expressed by participants. Relying on one's intuition to guide this process involves risk-taking. By developing the courage to engage in challenging conversations, educators can facilitate a more inclusive and reflective process that transcends conventional narratives dominated by comfort and the status quo.

2 Intuition and presence

Intuition, embodied understanding informed by relationship, is at the heart of restorative approaches. In intuition, one understands oneself, anticipates people's needs and is grounded in the present moment. With such an active presence, people can use criticality. Without it, it is not possible to be truly intuitive; without it, people are allowed to *not* use criticality. They may thus default to an inauthentic restorative justice practice that is harmful, colonial and patriarchal.

The meaning of *intuition* is often misunderstood in Western world views. It is not a peripheral, abstract concept; it is not magical. Rather, it is a form of knowledge within everyone's consciousness. Some people are more in touch with it, having deepened it through knowledge cumulatively acquired through life experiences and learnings. Many Eastern and Indigenous spiritual and philosophical practices rely on intuition and teach that intuitive capacities can be honed through practice. In the Hindu tradition, an intuitive person is highly intelligent in their higher-order thinking capabilities; their intentional and instinctual *kriyas* (actions) are used to achieve a higher purpose. Such people see the world through multiple lenses. They make choices based on seeing things as they are, without bias or expectations about a process – restorative or otherwise.

Intuition is an action-oriented process. It relies on one's inner knowing and a clear purpose for how one is in relationship with another. The process allows people to see conflict not in terms of right versus wrong but instead focuses on the feelings, needs and relationships of those involved. In an intuitive praxis, restorative justice practitioners take time to critically consider whether an incident such as a physical fight indicates a potentially larger conflict – the underlying issues that led to that outcome. Working within this framework of understanding the roots of harm and its impact forces people to deeply consider their intentions and subsequent actions, for both understanding and repairing harm. This stance allows practitioners to explore the depths of conflict while guarding against the influence of bias. It also allows them the space to access their intuition – their unconscious truths – about the conflict and make conscious, intentional and restorative responses to remediate harm.

Many individuals instinctively turn to their intuition for guidance, often believing that such a deeply personal insight arising from within is innate and beyond teaching. Yet, while it may not be directly teachable, intuition can indeed be cultivated and honed. People in the helping professions frequently tap into their intuitive understanding by taking a moment to attune to their bodily sensations to inform their responses. Through continuous practice, their proficiency in such

intuitive decision-making improves. For example, certain health care workers employ muscle testing as a technique to intuitively assess the body's needs, leveraging a blend of physical, emotional and spiritual awarenesses to guide their actions (Jensen, Stevens & Burls, 2016; Smith, Thurkettle & Cruz, 2004).

Similarly, restorative justice practitioners can learn to adopt unscripted dialogical methods that stem from intuitive awareness. This approach enables them to remain present and responsive to the needs of the moment. In this way, educators can be trained to lean on their intuition effectively, using a mindful and compassionate approach to each unique situation, thus fostering a readiness to engage with an open heart and mind. In resolving conflicts, teachers frequently rely on their intuition to guide their responses to the individuals involved. However, even well-trained teachers, proficient in tapping into their intuitive insights, can struggle in moments of high emotion and conflict. Their instincts may revert to punitive measures or colonial mindsets, obscuring their ability to maintain a clear and present focus. This challenge underscores the complexity of relying solely on intuition, especially under stress. Continuous reflection and learning are needed.

Of course, teachers trained in restorative justice also access cognitive schemas to prepare inclusive and equitable solutions to conflicts (Borko & Shavelson, 1990, pp. 311-346; Hennissen, Beckers & Moerkerke, 2017). These schemas shift based on experience and training as teachers learn how pedagogical thinking and actions shape learning outcomes for students (Markauskaite & Goodyear, 2014; Rinker & Jonason, 2014; Sipman, Thölke, Martens & McKenney, 2019).

Western patriarchal systems seek to enforce rigid, supposedly rational, 'right' versus 'wrong' beliefs. Their dominant societal ideals and expectations focus on punishment, and these punitive approaches to conflict are often used in conjunction with restorative processes, particularly when a practitioner first starts implementing them. In moments of high conflict, dominant societal norms for conflict responses typically take over: fight (destructively), flee or freeze (also destructively). As practitioners implement varying restorative approaches, this default to punitive approaches is actually an outcome of dominant colonial and patriarchal ideologies. If someone finds themselves caught in a punitive approach, they can use this awareness as a teaching moment – as a means of further strengthening their intuitive and restorative pedagogical repertoire.

Teaching people – especially educators and young people – how to use scripted questions and responses to address conflict contributes to alleviating conflictual tension and helps avoid destructive consequences. Skilled practitioners who remain consistently and critically in touch with their intuition, and those who have been practising restorative justice for several years, know when to stop, let go and re-enter conflict constructively. They do this by *scaffolding*.

3 Scaffolding

Scaffolding restorative responses to address trauma and oppression requires presence and critical thinking (Desautels, 2018). Being present in conflictual moments allows people to pause and draw on their intuition to guide their

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responses. Balancing process-based responses with intuitive, reflexive praxis contributes to acknowledging the humanity of the people involved.

Moments of presence and connection are preventive measures that build relationships and deter the potential for escalation. When teachers draw on relationships and let themselves be guided by well-honed intuition, they become more present in ordinary circumstances as well as when conflicts arise. This helps them see the full iceberg of conflict. Here, I outline three premises for enabling such moments:

- 1 *Beginners need scripts.* Without this framework, it is easy to fall back on familiar, punitive approaches either out of habit or because, regardless of their willingness to try something different, practitioners do not have the skills or confidence, unguided, to get all the way through a restorative approach.
- 2 *Scripts alone are not enough.* Educators or practitioners do not always naturally accommodate the divergences and surprises that accompany complex interpersonal relationships. Sticking to the script and ignoring these complications interferes with the restorative justice process.
- 3 *Reflexive praxis needs to be honed.* Time and space need to be provided for reflection. Reflection needs to include both critical thought (e.g. acknowledging bias or setting intention) and intuition (deep knowledge, drawing on relationships and experience to guide action). Such a process is needed to guide the use and modification of scripts and other tools to better suit the needs of different conflicts and individuals.

Educators may use what I refer to as *I see you* moments as part of proactively implementing restorative justice in education. In these moments, they take notice of the students, pausing to acknowledge them through eye contact, a smile, a kind greeting or a nod of affirmation. This can naturally lead to more *we see you* moments because intuition is a kind of two-way, holistic knowing that implies students and educators seeing each other. The Zulu concept of *sawubona* (*see me*) furthers how these moments are established and reiterates the importance of acknowledging each other's presence – in the present moment, just as they are (Smith, 2021).

In such moments of seeing one another in high- and low-conflict moments, people develop the skills and techniques that facilitate these connections. Adults modelling consistent *I see you* moments in the classroom are using a proactive tool to build connection and community while deterring conflict escalations. They are creating a culture of seeing each other and supporting each other's journeys.

Educators who demonstrate personal warmth while also holding high expectations for students ensure successful teaching and student engagement (Kleinfeld, 1975). Intuitively connecting with students who need to be seen and heard deepens relational connections (Torff & Sternberg, 2001). When educators have built strong relationships with students who might otherwise demonstrate resistance to learning or who have been harmed through hegemonic approaches to learning, they holistically embody a culturally centred teaching practice (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Intuitive praxis facilitates how teachers can lead inclusively as they become acutely aware of which students need to be centred at various moments throughout the day, depending on each student's context and situation.

This further exemplifies the goal of restorative justice pedagogy: it is not a one-size-fits-all package. It relies on knowing who and how to centre in various moments. Knowing and valuing students' experiences means that their academic and non-academic talents can be authentically acknowledged and validated (Toshalis, 2012).

4 Responding inclusively to differences and diversity

Restorative justice pedagogies can encourage dialogue about diverse issues in both scripted and unscripted contexts (Vaandering, 2014a). Such dialogue may include asking typical restorative questions such as: 'What happened?', 'What were you thinking at the time?', 'How do you feel about it now?', and 'How do you think this has impacted others?'. As students discuss these questions, they abide by certain dialogic inclusion principles, including agreements around shared values of respect, compassion and empathy. In diverse classrooms, committing to acknowledging cultural diversity and developing an affinity for marginalised individuals and groups becomes more salient (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009). Teachers can apply these questions in almost all conflicts, but the process (and outcome) is highly dependent on their relationship with their students (Bickmore, 2002; Brown & Baxley, 2016).

Supporting teachers to understand restorative justice in education and to see the need to embody an intuitive, reflexive praxis is critical to its successful implementation. Prescriptive responses used without intuitive, reflexive praxis cannot facilitate inclusion. But engaging in restorative justice dialogue using intuitive, reflexive praxis takes into account how students' diverse cultural backgrounds can impact the process. Critical reflection is vital when working with marginalised groups. When teachers rely on cultural assumptions and underlying biases to mitigate conflict, relationships deteriorate, misconceptions prevail and the potential for conflict escalation increases (Parker, 2013). Research shows how school personnel have often (consciously or unconsciously) justified the use of punitive discipline based on expectations and assumptions about the behaviours of students from marginalised cultural groups – most notably Black and Indigenous students (Anyon et al., 2016; Utheim, 2014).

How do we diversify responsive alternatives to prescriptive reactions? How can we rely on scripts' usefulness while simultaneously being aware of their potential harm? Responsive regulation (such as flexible rules that adapt to changes) can stimulate a collective commitment to build peace and inclusion among participants in any community (Braithwaite, 2016; Morrison & Arvanitidis, 2019). Such active engagement shows how to build the kind of community that can push back against oppression and exclusion.

Some teachers intuitively value the cultural norms of their diverse students and make concerted efforts to reduce culturally based exclusion or disrespectful interpersonal and cultural conflicts (Parker & Bickmore, 2012). Such awareness contributes to a teacher's intuitive choices. The teacher might know, for example, that a student may not have had breakfast before coming to school; they might be

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fasting for Ramadan, which would mean they are tired and hungry, especially in the afternoon. Knowing this might change expectations around behaviour or emotional regulation and whether students need more or different support.

Similarly, many teachers might not be aware that gender and sexual orientation impact how they address conflict in their classroom (Parker & Bickmore, 2021). Too often, a lack of such awareness can reinforce heteronormative, exclusionary dynamics when responding to conflict. However, when teachers pay attention to how gender influences their restorative justice processes, they learn to rely on their intuitive, reflexive praxis to facilitate a more inclusive restorative response. Students experience certain types of conflict based on their gender; teachers may be influenced by what they interpret as male or female behaviour in their students (Bergsgaard, 1997). In any case, overly relying on scripts – or perhaps over-scripting conflict resolution – risks escalating the situation. The use of scripts clearly needs to be balanced.

Intuition is essential for applying restorative justice principles. Practitioners' intuition intersects with their experiences, relationships and their current capacity for presence. Many teachers have preconceived ideas of how to approach conflict based on their teacher training programme or their own personal schooling experiences. These preconceptions appear in their intuitive responses, which are conscious and unconscious enactments. Some teachers might reinforce prescriptive solutions, maintaining a supposed cultural order (Lederach, 1996). Teachers' intuition can also fluctuate, influenced by daily variations or stressful situations, potentially affecting their decision-making. However, with experience, continual practice and a focus on self-care, teachers can strengthen their presence and improve their intuitive skills.

Restorative justice in education requires a philosophical shift in understanding how young people learn and develop. This commitment requires deep awareness and being continually open to learning; an intuitive, reflexive praxis supports a restorative ethos.

5 Use of scripts: enhancing or inhibiting?

Most teachers receive prescriptive training. Still, they have choices for using these methods in conjunction with what Lederach (1996) referred to as 'elicitive approaches' (bottom-up dialogue that comes from within).

The use of scripts shapes – and thereby perhaps constrains – the narrative of a conflict, in ways that may further marginalise some students (Parker-Shandal, 2022). Thus, addressing inequity is fundamental to fostering an environment conducive to inclusion and connection (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023). Intuition and critical thinking *together* allow educators, even those using scripts, to use selected questions with intention and to modify approaches that facilitate equity and inclusion. Initiating any restorative justice process without proactively addressing inequity is moot.

Questions in some scripts assume harm, and position a student as the perpetrator of that harm. However, students do not always assume harm in the

same way that adults do. They may not always feel that they have the space to share organically, and teachers may miss opportunities to get to the root of the conflict. For their part, some teachers rely on scripted questions because they are unsure of what to say. They operate in the hope that they are less harmful by following an approved model. Alternatives to prescriptive, adult-centred scripts exist, including prioritising student-generated questions that open space for more students to participate agentially (Aquino, Wadhwa & Manchester, 2021).

Scripts can serve as valuable tools for educators seeking guidance on how to initiate or navigate through a restorative process. For them, having access to scripts may be beneficial. Many teachers I interviewed said that, without the script, they wouldn't have remembered what to say or do, particularly in high-conflict moments. The scripted questions supported their process. In turn, an intuitive, reflexive praxis supports teachers who wish to modify their approach to scripts when seeking to resolve conflict and promote peace without incurring any script-related harm. Preparing for a variety of student/participant responses is as important as crafting a set agenda of questions.

Building teachers' capacity to create a restorative school and classroom culture allows for increasing levels of student engagement in restorative dialogue (Parker-Shandal & Bickmore, 2020). Thus, individual teachers' choices and actions help shape how restorative justice is enacted in schools.

How people are trained to use restorative justice in education varies across schools, districts and countries (see Brown, 2018; Evans, Lester & Anfar, 2013). Implementation post-training also varies, based on factors such as ongoing support, mentorship, school climate and teachers' capacities (Parker-Shandal, 2022). Furthermore, many people trained in restorative justice are not always actively aware of how to integrate trauma-based responses (Perry, 2014). For example, they may not know how to reflect on the impact of shaming or how the way they implement restorative processes may create further exclusion (Brummer, 2020; Randall & Haskell, 2013).

There are varying approaches to professional development for restorative justice in schools (Brown, 2021; Hollweck, Reimer & Bouchard, 2019; Vaandering, 2014b). Popular among many school boards is a two- or three-day training programme that provides detailed scripts and sequencing for school personnel to follow when conflict erupts. Many administrators I interviewed (as part of a larger project on restorative justice in schools) said that their teachers relied on these scripts for guidance (see Parker-Shandal, 2022). The teachers' use of prescribed questions allowed for cohesive experiences between the classroom and the school office.

Lustick (2021) drew on Sergiovanni's (2000) distinction between 'systems' approaches and 'lifeworld' orientations. Principals or leaders who adopt a systems-oriented approach rely on scripted interactions that may not allow for the building of relational connections. Conversely, those who are lifeworld-oriented may still work within systems but approach them as transformative opportunities for strengthening the school community (Lustick, 2021). In this way, being rooted in a lifeworld approach – where one values relationships – allows for one to be guided by one's intuition in building a more equitable and inclusive community

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while also being aware of pushing back on colonising systems that lead to further marginalisation.

Using scripts requires paying close attention to how and in what context the scripted questions are asked, and whom they benefit. For instance, if feelings and needs had been overlooked during a restorative questioning process, being attentive to emotions equips facilitators with tools to interrupt what could become harmful. Emotions are ‘about’ something: “aboutness” of emotions means they involve a stance on the world, or a way of apprehending the world’ (Ahmed, 2004: 7). Emphasizing the critical feminist perspective introduced earlier (Ahmed, 2004; hooks, 2000) fosters emotional connectivity within restorative practices, facilitating conflict resolution in a manner that promotes inclusivity.

6 Methodological approach and context

In the following vignettes, I provide examples from a previous study (Parker-Shandal, 2022), a larger research project on implementing peace-making circles in diverse classrooms. I wished to learn how teachers’ various approaches to scripted and unscripted restorative responses shaped opportunities for both inclusion and resistance. Data from the study focused on how the role of scripts in restorative justice in education training influenced teachers’ classroom practice. Here, I analyse these critical incidents to illustrate how restorative justice practitioners can learn by acknowledging and centring their intuitive, reflexive praxis.

I have selected cases that explore the concept of intuition and the role it plays in using scripted or prepared processes to approach conflictual situations. For purposes of illustrating how teachers’ use of scripts and intuition impacted their choices, I focus on observations and interviews conducted in three distinct classrooms in three different schools, all located within the same urban area of Southern Ontario: Grade 2 (students ages 7 to 8), Grade 6 (students ages 10 to 11) and Grade 8 (students ages 12 to 13). The schools where the teachers taught all had posters on the walls in the hallways that included examples of restorative scripts and questions. Many teachers appeared to rely on these questions when conflicts arose, indicating their apparent acceptance of the scripted process.

My immersion in various classroom settings allowed me to see how approaches to conflicts often depended on how the teacher felt and what kind of conflict they chose to deal with. I observed some teachers choosing different conflict-handling options at different moments, depending on the student, the time of day and their apparent stress level. For example, one teacher who consistently used the circle process also practised exclusion and a win-lose approach to teacher-student conflict; she asked one student to leave the classroom when he was disruptive. On another day, she attempted a relational approach with that same student, asking him, ‘What’s going on with you today? Are you feeling tired?’ when he lay down during the circle process.

7 Various approaches to scripted and unscripted restorative responses

7.1 *The blueberry conflict: a scripted approach*

Ms Fitzgerald's Grade 2 classroom had 23 students (ages 7 to 8). Her school participated in a meal programme that included a morning snack that was freely available to all students in school communities that qualified based on students' socioeconomic representation. It ensured that all students had access to breakfast. One day in March 2020, the meal, consisting of blueberries and yoghurt, was passed out by two student volunteers. As this was happening, I observed a conflict that quickly impacted interpersonal dynamics in this primary classroom. Ms Fitzgerald, aware of the rising tension, announced that her students were 'in dangerous territory' because of their lack of focus and loud voices. Several things combined to complicate her typically calm disposition: the disruptive students, an ongoing strike action in the teachers' union – and the COVID-19 strain newly arriving in Canada. It was early on in what would become a global pandemic. Many teachers had to prioritise keeping everyone's desks and floors clean, even though many rooms lacked adequate cleaning supplies.

Mark, a white male student, raised his hand to get Ms Fitzgerald's attention, and she walked over to him. He told her about a conflict he had just had with his South Asian female peer, Shreya, who had just put a blueberry that had fallen on the desk back into Mark's yoghurt bowl. Ms Fitzgerald immediately stopped the class, stood in front of the chalkboard and asked for everyone's attention. In an impatient tone, she described what had happened and then asked the entire class to respond to the question: 'How is Mark feeling right now?'. The students – anxious to please their teacher with the right answer – raised their hands to offer responses: 'grossed out', 'disrespected', 'hungry', 'mad'. While the students shouted their responses, Shreya remained seated, with her head down, looking at the ground, clearly holding back tears. Ms Fitzgerald firmly told the students they needed to be mindful of germs and asked them: "These aren't good feelings, right? And what's the problem with doing this?". 'It has germs', one student said, which Ms Fitzgerald enthusiastically agreed with, and firmly said, 'We have to be careful when we are managing food. Is it a healthy thing to do?'. 'No!', several male students spoke up in sync. She went on to discuss the importance of food hygiene with the class.

Ms Fitzgerald centred on conflict management – which took her out of her present moment, constraining her capacity to respond intuitively. Still appearing to be perturbed, she quietly asked Mark to dispose of his contaminated snack and get a fresh one. Shreya immediately rose to help Mark, but Ms Fitzgerald asked her to remain seated. She then spoke to Shreya, crouching down beside her. She methodically asked a series of restorative questions, maintaining a firm tone throughout: 'What's going on with you today? This is not like you. What's happening?' Shreya did not offer a reply. She seemed upset and continued to look down while fidgeting with things on her desk. Indicating her use of a script, Ms Fitzgerald asked Shreya what she could have done to make things right. Shreya said that she could have put the blueberry in the garbage. Ms Fitzgerald repeatedly asked Shreya to look at her, but Shreya seemed embarrassed and continued to look

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downward. Ms Fitzgerald eventually got up and then spoke to the whole class, asking them to shift away from their snack and prepare for the day's lesson.

Ms Fitzgerald considered herself a proponent of restorative teaching, integrating circle practices into her daily pedagogy to foster a critical awareness of interpersonal dynamics in her classroom. Each morning, she conducted a talking-piece circle and kept scripted restorative justice questions at her desk, signalling her commitment to these values. However, in this moment of high conflict, the scripted restorative approach she selected inadvertently aimed to manage relationships in a way that limited her students' ability to embrace restorative principles authentically. Going through the motions of asking restorative questions in a hurried manner and tense tone undermined the process. This method, especially including involving the whole class in addressing the conflict, unintentionally caused harm to Shreya by singling her out in a manner that was both shaming and isolating.

Ms Fitzgerald's inability to tap into an intuitive, reflexive praxis was amplified by the stressful context of the classroom: the new need to sanitise desks and floors in ways that were likely not done before; the impending strike, the constant reminders she made to some students to keep their voice levels down. Had Ms Fitzgerald taken a step back to pause and approach the conflict through a more critical and inclusive lens, she might have chosen to have a smaller restorative conference with the two students. Thus prepared, and if necessary, she could have had a circle with the entire class, focusing on everyone's responsibility to respect food hygiene and to re-establish classroom expectations amidst the recent change in guidelines for increased sanitation practices.

Her immediate – and seemingly unconscious – punitive reaction alienated Shreya, who was targeted for putting the blueberry back into the bowl. Ms Fitzgerald typically held space for students' emotions, so this reaction was uncharacteristic of her. She moved away from a space of presence and, in doing so, she did not prioritise the emotional safety for all students in the classroom, including Shreya. Instead, her reaction – clearly stemming from the fear and anxiety in her current environment – named Shreya's behaviour as something for the rest of the class to pick apart. In this way, her scripted approach to the restorative questions resulted in shaming the student.

With Shreya, Ms Fitzgerald went through a list of restorative questions, and Shreya responded, in short phrases, with her head down – a position indicating shame. Being called out did not appear to solve the issue for the students. However, it did appear to satisfy the teacher, who made the decision to use the script as a tool to quell the conflict. As far as she was concerned, she had resolved the conflict through a restorative process.

This case is an example of how a teacher's intuition might be constrained in a stressful situation where students were not listening and tension was rising in the school community. In the past, this teacher had made intentional, proactive choices to mitigate conflicts by creating a calmer environment. For instance, she switched off the fluorescent lights in her room, admitting only calming natural light from the windows. For her, the natural light and fresh air from open windows contributed

to 'keeping them more settled'. This choice indicated how her intuition was active outside conflict situations; she relied on the scripts and her intuition concurrently.

Ms Fitzgerald's choice to go through the motions of the restorative questions – and to rely solely on scripts – caused harm to at least one student. It also indicated how difficult it is even for intuitive teachers to rely on their conscious, calm-state choices in the midst of high emotions and conflict. Her choice is an example of how critical it is to take a step back from conflict in the classroom and to pause to assess one's intuitive response before responding. Making amends by naming harm through a process of intuitively calling in and connecting with students requires one to be present and aware.

7.2 The discrimination conflict: an unscripted approach

Like many elementary teachers, Ms Weaver faced challenges with students who appeared disengaged or showed little regard for the norms of the circle process, particularly in her Grade 8 class, which seemed fragmented by cliques. Aiming to address a racist incident that had unfolded in her classroom, Ms Weaver organised a peace circle. Opting for a broad approach, she facilitated the discussion with open-ended, unscripted, elicitive questions that invited students to reflect on personal or observed experiences of discrimination, deliberately avoiding direct questions about the incident, such as 'What happened?', or inquiries about who was harmed and the extent of that harm. Her intention was to foster a broader conversation on discrimination without singling out individuals or assigning blame, in order to maintain a safe and confidential environment. However, during the session, most students chose to remain silent when the talking piece came to them. Only one student spoke up, sharing an observation of homophobia experienced by a friend outside the class, illustrating the complexities of addressing sensitive issues in a group setting and the challenge of engaging students in meaningful dialogue on discrimination without addressing specific incidents directly.

As the circle continued, more students passed. Ms Weaver asked the class:

So, for those of you who passed, can you think of maybe something that has happened to your parents? Some might be new [to the country], and that can be hard.

The students, fully cognisant of the racist incident under discussion, displayed visible discomfort. This discomfort underscores the challenge of setting appropriate boundaries within a circle to ensure a space safe enough for all participants, especially when employing an unscripted approach. Despite Ms Weaver's grounding in the basics of restorative circle practice, she lacked specific training in facilitating discussions on anti-racism and anti-oppression. This gap highlights the need for comprehensive preparation in addressing complex social issues within the framework of restorative justice in education (O'Brien & Nygreen, 2020).

Individual meetings with students before a class-wide discussion may help prepare the class for addressing complex issues like racism. Without such preparation, trauma may be inadvertently triggered among some participants

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(Brummer, 2020). Recognising the emotional undercurrents and the students' reluctance to share, Ms Weaver concluded the circle by validating their feelings and honouring their silence: 'I know some of you are feeling things and not ready to share, and I respect that and your private thoughts.' While this acknowledgement attempted to navigate the session's emotional complexities, it also meant the underlying issues remained unaddressed, highlighting the delicate balance between respecting students' emotional boundaries and the need for resolution.

The teacher's unscripted questions that asked students to name what they or their families had experienced focused on presenting discrimination generically. Although Ms Weaver appeared to intuitively sense the students' disengagement, she did not leverage her intuition to steer the conversation towards a more engaging and transformative discussion. Most students didn't seem to want to share. The few students who shared focused their responses on family dynamics and sexuality. In this class, more than half of the students were racialised, but they clearly didn't feel safe talking about race.

At the end of the circle, when the students left the classroom, Ms Weaver shared with me her continued distress over the incident. She knew the boy who had started it and described her internal struggle. She said she felt conflicted, surprised that he had done this, because he was Roma; he had made fun of someone using an Indian accent. In the interview, she said: 'You'd think he'd get it. Doesn't he know his people are the ones being persecuted?' This reflection highlights the complex ways in which assumptions about students' identities can shape a teacher's approach to resolving conflicts, underscoring the importance of recognising how conflicts may amplify underlying sensitivities, potentially hindering the restorative process. Ms Weaver's intuition guided her to bring students together to discuss the conflict, but when, amid preparing and facilitating the circle, she did not draw on her intuition to redirect or reframe her questions in ways that dissected the conflict, she prevented the students from moving towards a place of resolution. Instead, she consciously disconnected herself from her emotions to placate or neutralise the issue. In situations such as this, carefully preparing scripted questions designed to address particular conflicts (such as responding to incidents of hate or racism) could have better supported the teacher in having the confidence and structure to move the dialogue deeper.

7.3 The soccer shots conflict: a blended approach

Ms Roberts's Grade 6 class was in a school close to where Ms Weaver and Ms Fitzgerald taught. This class was not as diverse as the other two classes. Creating a restorative ethos and embracing restorative justice pedagogy was her personal interest and was central to her teaching practice. She welcomed her students' participation in creating their classroom culture.

After recess, the students filed into the classroom and sat down for their maths class. Jerome, a Black student, approached Ms Roberts. He said he had a head injury and explained that it was caused by being targeted during recess by one of the students in the class. The alleged perpetrator, Edwin, an East Asian boy, was sitting at his desk, looking down. Intuitively sensing the tension, Ms Roberts decided to suspend the planned maths class to facilitate a small group conference

with the two students. She asked students to work independently. If someone were to enter her classroom, they might not have even been aware that she was managing a violent conflict; she quietly and calmly spoke to the students, remaining present to the feelings they shared. After speaking with the two students individually, she brought them together to discuss what happened. Her voice was barely audible as she spoke to them during this restorative conference. Seated with Ms Roberts between them, both students engaged in the discussion with a sense of security, evident in their upright posture, eye contact, and nods of agreement—signals of active listening and mutual respect, from a Western cultural viewpoint. After hearing each of them describe what had happened, Ms Roberts encouraged Jerome and Edwin to take a walk in the halls to continue their reconciliation process, signalling a move towards resolution. With the immediate conflict addressed, she then redirected her focus to the entire class. Ms Roberts's intuitive choice to delay the start of their scheduled maths lesson and attend to her students' emotional needs contributed to building a sense of emotional safety in the classroom. When the two students returned, Jerome sat with his head on his desk, applying the ice they had picked up on their walk. Ms Roberts began the class. But instead of asking students to get their maths books out, she opened a restorative conversation that included a blend of scripted and unscripted restorative questions. Her reliance on her intuition – as well as her skilled praxis – allowed them all to take care of the class while attending to the specific needs of individuals in the class. In this reintegration process, the classroom community came back together. The class ended with the teacher asking the students to take out their journals and share their feelings and needs at the moment.

Subsequently, Ms Roberts requested both boys involved in the conflict, Edwin and Jerome, to remain behind during the afternoon recess for a follow-up conversation. While she was engaged in discussion with another group of students, Edwin approached Jerome in a quiet, conciliatory manner. They both offered apologies, culminating their conversation with a hug. Following this moment of mutual understanding, they chose to sit together, collaborating on their work at a shared table for the rest of the recess period, symbolising their restored friendship and willingness to move forward together.

In an interview following the incident, Ms Roberts said that Jerome had had a bad experience with schooling – teachers had constantly told him he wasn't good enough. She sought to change the internal belief that had been created by offering continual opportunities for connection. Ms Roberts felt that restorative justice in her classroom meant ensuring students' physical, mental and emotional safety. In almost all our conversations, she spoke about her daily struggle to get her students to be accountable for their white privilege – and to be critically conscious of how colonial ideologies crept up in their interactions with each other. She would often use data that documented missing and murdered Indigenous women and evidence of racial profiling experienced by Black males by police officers as content for her maths class. Acutely aware of the entrenched biases that her student lived with, Ms Roberts' choice – to respond restoratively to the two male students involved in a violent conflict – was intentional.

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Her awareness and intuitive intention to integrate anti-racism into her classroom contributed to creating a safe space to talk about conflicts – even if the conflict didn't explicitly address racism. Taking up the issues around interpersonal conflicts felt necessary and meaningful. Dissecting conflicts involved, without a doubt, a combination of scripted and unscripted processes.

While Ms Roberts suspended her maths class to focus on rebuilding relationships, the time invested in addressing the emotional well-being of her students cultivated a more secure learning environment. The following day, this focus on emotional reconciliation bore fruit: all students, including those involved in the previous day's conflict, were notably more engaged in their maths lesson. Clearly, moving fluidly through the processes of repairing, restoring and reintegrating allowed for a safe space for students to actively engage in their learning. The experience highlighted the importance of intuitive understanding as a cornerstone of successful restorative justice practice.

8 Discussion

Teachers' critical thinking and their inclination to resolve conflicts proactively and inclusively are impacted by their intuitive, reflexive praxis. These teachers' choices to rely on their intuition as part of their restorative justice pedagogy were, at times, obvious and, at times, more covert. In the time that I spent in various classrooms, many teachers used restorative justice pedagogy, such as circles or conferences, to address perceived wrongdoing or conflict between teachers and students or between students and their peers. However, it was not always clear whether the outcome was satisfactory for the students.

Tapping into how students are feeling and responding to various peace-making (problem-solving) approaches is critical to making conscious, intuitive choices that are inclusive and equitable. Students are aware of when outcomes stay within the realm of *peace-making* (in which little attention is paid to long-term goals) and are acutely aware of when justice is centred through *peace-building* approaches (which are attentive to equity and relational connection) (Bickmore, 2011).

Teachers' responses to conflict will always reflect the situation and context in which they find themselves. Their intuition may guide them to make certain choices that may or may not shift the conflict toward a more constructive resolution. The use of scripts can, at times, enhance teachers' intuitive, reflexive praxis. However, when teachers are in high-conflict, stressful situations, overly relying on scripts – without critical intuitive praxis – can create further damage. My argument emphasises two critical elements of school-based restorative justice: scripts can be used constructively, *and* tapping into one's intuition can further strengthen pedagogical praxis.

Scripts can help encourage a teacher's intuitive choice to approach a conflict, such as in the discrimination conflict (see Section 7.2). Overly relying on scripts without tapping into how participants are responding and without being in tune with the overall energy of the room can lead to disengagement and exclusion, as in the blueberry conflict (Section 7.1). Relying on scripts with an intuitive praxis can

allow for a structured and supportive approach where students feel safe to express their thoughts, questions and perspectives (Section 7.3). This kind of ‘contained risk-taking’ can create a classroom environment where mutual respect underpins interactions (Pace, 2021). In such an environment, teachers can address complex or controversial topics in the classroom, such as racism or historical or contemporary injustices. In this way, when teachers use scripts and intuition thoughtfully, they can anticipate opportunities for deep discussions and mitigate situations where conflicts might be tapped but are not opened up for deeper exploration.

8.1 Students’ agentic possibilities: intuition as inclusion

Some teachers raised concerns in interviews and debriefings. For one, they envisioned responses from students that they found frightening. In their implementation of restorative circles, their students’ responses often were not as scripted as the questions. For instance, it is entirely possible that a young person might choose to refuse to respond to a question. A climate of exclusion might contribute to students’ marginalisation or silence during conflictual discussions that touch upon or imply linkages to their traumatic experiences. At times, the voices of less vocal (perhaps marginalised) students may be silenced in some circles, for example, when personal issues are being discussed or when their teacher or peers have left them feeling unheard.

Language use in any restorative moment can shift how educators can inflict further harm or facilitate further inclusion (Winn, 2020). Restorative pedagogies that build critical consciousness – and draw on intuitive, reflexive praxis – challenge the culture of silence and offer the possibility of transforming hegemonic classroom cultures (Parker, 2020).

Contributing to a restorative classroom climate at any given time in any classroom is a teacher’s mood and their treatment of the students, and their students’ agency and their capacity to embody restorative justice approaches. Without paying attention to emotions and intuitive reflexes, the potential for defaulting to a scripted, biased-fuelled process increases. For instance, many teachers demand quiet, particularly from students of colour; loudness, especially from Black children, is often misinterpreted as aggression (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Pausing to interrupt these systemic and (un)conscious biases should be part of restorative justice in education.

8.2 Sharpening our intuitive, reflexive praxis

Many restorative justice practitioners – educators, social workers and front-line workers – intuitively use techniques to sharpen and clear their intuition. These may include grounding exercises, self-care, meditation, yoga, silence or welcoming moments of pause. For generations, many South and East Asian cultures have passed on tools for helping people access their intuition, leading to better choices and actions and ultimately increasing the potential for peace. Indigenous spirituality guides people to be in touch with their heart and spirit to discern the best outcomes for the relational well-being of everyone.

For many young people, entering the classroom and being ‘seen’ by an adult – through sustained eye contact, a hug, handshake and affirmation or a soft and

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warm tone – fills them for the day. Some students may need to be filled and seen differently at different times. Young people coming out of a home where they just witnessed or experienced abuse, where they were not fed, or where they were not seen are highly fragile. They rely on their teachers' intuitive presence. They need an adult to give them those *I see you* moments, to tap into what they need so they can rest in a place of warmth and perform at their highest potential.

Critical and ongoing commitment to an intuitive, reflexive practice is a skill that many restorative practitioners and participants can hone (Johansson & Kroksmark, 2004). This kind of emotional compass can affirm how certain bodies and feelings are regulated within societal norms (Ahmed, 2004). However, just as it is not possible to mandate vulnerability (Gregory & Evans, 2020), it is not possible to mandate the use of intuition. It is difficult work, requiring personal commitment to pushing back on patriarchal, colonial and heteronormative ideals. Doing this also requires self-care. Still, exploring *what is happening* when things are not going well often forces people to look at their intuitive ways of knowing. Critical reflection allows participants to understand the potential of inclusion (Gregory, Clawson, Davis & Gerewitz, 2016). This potential needs to be grasped and understood; sometimes, this takes time and many failed attempts. Because it involves physical and emotional work, it is sometimes messy and emotional for both students and teachers (Garrett & Alvey, 2021).

However, ignoring and avoiding intuitive responses to conflicts will move young people away from the transformative heart-and-spirit potential of restorative justice and towards punitive and colonial imperatives that continually escalate conflict and preserve a toxic climate that does not allow for authentic engagement. Building connections and community with students yields better outcomes. This involves consistently using restorative language in conversations and interactions both inside and outside the classroom. This also means having clear expectations for students and staff in the building.

The conflicts highlighted in this article illustrate how such challenges can enhance relational bonds, refine individuals' comprehension of issues, and foster a community environment conducive to deepening awareness through conflict. The diverse interpretations of these conflicts' developments offer rich avenues for further analysis, shedding light on the significance of intuition and attentiveness in navigating these critical and delicate moments of restorative practice.

Conflicts – such as why a student placed a fallen blueberry back into her neighbour's bowl – teach us how power is established. Conflict is valuable because it highlights violations and the implications of harming another person. How educators deal with emotions, feelings and interpersonal dynamics in the classroom is critical for teaching students about resistance. As students practise the communication and analytical skills necessary to decipher their feelings and conflicts, they expose themselves and others to deficiencies in their arguments. The danger of not addressing conflict and instead presuming neutrality is obvious: it maintains hegemonic systems of control without reason or judgement. Scripts in these instances can work, but overly relying on them without intuitive reflection allows for missed opportunities.

Even an experienced, skilled teacher can be thrown off if she is blindsided by her own emotions and so cannot rely on an unscripted, intuitive response to managing conflict. Years of experience may be of little assistance. Even if she can access her unconscious pedagogies, those unconscious choices may be exclusionary or biased. When individuals make choices, their decisions are the result of a complex filtering process where intuition is deeply informed by their lived experiences, societal norms, and the power dynamics they observe and internalise. A student or educator who has experienced marginalisation may develop a keen sense for reading subtle cues of exclusion or acceptance in social settings, influencing their choices in ways that might prioritise safety. Conversely, someone in a position of power might be conditioned to trust their intuition without questioning, potentially overlooking the nuanced experiences of those with less power. A critical, ongoing, self-introspective analysis allows for deeper engagement with conscious and unconscious choices.

Any restorative pedagogical approach must include a critical reflexive praxis that supports practitioners in using restorative justice processes. This contributes to both changing how they understand conflict and not just the formula they use to address it. Awareness of how to deepen and rely on one's intuition is a critical component of making space for the emotions around specific conflicts while attending to equity and inclusion for everyone involved. Everyone has intuition; honing one's capacity for reflexive praxis is a way to deepen it.

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